

COOL HUNTING

Artist Cole Sternberg's Boat Voyage from Japan to Portland
by David Graver
January 26, 2016

Late last year, bicoastal American painter Cole Sternberg stepped aboard a bulk shipping vessel at the Shin Kasado port in Western Japan. It was the Ultra Letizia ship's maiden voyage, headed toward Portland, Oregon. And, while the boat carried no cargo (as it was on a test run) it would provide a home and studio space for Sternberg and his linen, graphite and watercolors. On board, the artist produced a series of works inspired by the experience, all of which incorporated a process of weathering by the elements. These works will be shown at LA's MAMA Gallery, during Sternberg's forthcoming solo exhibition "The Nature of Breathing in Salt," but the story behind them all warrants a deeper dive.

As for how this trip drew his artistic interests, Sternberg explains to CH, "For years I've been obsessed with the idea of a Pacific Ocean crossing on a shipping vessel. Experiencing the micro-environment of life on the ship and the macro-environment of being a tiny spec in the massive ocean, being disconnected from technology, and exposing artwork to the elements were all appealing factors." The artist admits to feeling a sense of isolation at times along the way—and some of that translates into the depths visible within the works he produced. Though, there's beauty at play as well—and a touch of adventure.

The trip was slated to take 16 days but, due to severe weather, Sternberg ended up staying on board for 22 days. He notes, "We faced 35-foot waves and 30 degree rolls at the most extreme point." Salty sea air whipped the artist while he created his pieces on deck. More than embracing the environment, Sternberg actively sought out nature's impact on his pieces. Paintings were left in the open air day and night. He later tethered all of them to ropes and dangled each painting into the ocean while the ship moved at 12 knots. While his signature characteristics are still present, the impact of the outside world provides an uncommon filter to the works—a lacquer or infusion, in essence, of salty winds and saline water. As he describes it, "The result was patterned erasure where the environment really became the artist of the works."

Sternberg explains the first obstacles arrived well before he boarded the ship. Setting up such an experience "was a tricky process," he notes. "The amount of 'freedom' I was asking for in my creative process required a shipping company, vessel and crew that understood my mission and desires and supported them to a high degree." His journey was rescheduled multiple times, but found an ideal patron in A.O. Shipping. "They allowed me to travel on the maiden voyage of the ship, to bring a crew of three and shoot a documentary about the journey and provided me with access to every corner of the ship." Sternberg's watercolor works carry the chaos of all of the above—and in their own way, they carry more than salt spray, but also the story of a unique voyage.

"The Nature of Breathing in Salt" opens 30 January and will run through 7 March at LA's MAMA Gallery (1242 Palmetto St).